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ABSTRACT

Current literature on writing instruction focuses on the writing conference, which accompanies a shift in emphasis from product to process and potentially transforms the teacher's role from task master and evaluator to respondent, opening the door to greater peer interaction in literacy learning. However desirable this ideal may be, extant research on classroom communication indicates that teachers dominate instructional talk in both the classroom and also in the writing conference. The limitations of the conference arise perhaps because much of the talk is instructional, that is, geared toward an expert/novice distinction between teacher and student. To combat these limitations it may be necessary to change many of the current assumptions about the nature of instruction. Generalizing from research on the learning of oral language at home to language teaching in school, five maxims can be generated: (1) assume competence, (2) know the learner, (3) share interest in the task at hand, (4) follow the learner, and (5) capitalize on uncertainty. To change the way that teachers and students interact in a writing conference, it will probably be necessary to reshape the conditions of all classroom communication so that it is genuinely supportive of student growth and development. A three-page reference list concludes the document. (SRT)

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TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT WRITING CONFERENCES

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Why Are We Interested in Talk About Text?

At the heart of a great deal of contemporary research on text composition and comprehension is the assumption of a model of learning in which the novice's development is supported by dialogue with a more experienced person (Bruner, 1966; Wertsch, 1980). Scholars seeking metaphors for how beginners learn to compose or comprehend turn to research on oral language learning. Here they find evidence that the conversations of care-givers and young children play an important part in language development (Halliday, 1975; Ninio and Bruner, 1976). Bruner, for example, argues that as children learn language in the family

> mothers most often see their role as supporting the child in achieving an intended outcome, entering only to assist, reciprocate, or 'scaffold' the interaction (1975, p. 12).

Researchers and educators who apply Bruner's "scaffold" metaphor to language instruction often cite the developmental theories of Vygotsky (1978) in support of their work. Here, too, dialogue between novice and experienced cultural member plays a fundamental role in intellectual development. Extending Vygotsky's theoretical work in experiments with mothers and young children, researchers argue that, in dialogue, the learner operates just beyond but "in anticipation of" competence. With interactional support, she participates before she can perform an activity unaided. Over time and with models and practice, the child gradually internalizes the knowledge represented in conversations with adults (Wertsch, 1980).

By extension, educational researchers argue that in talking with students in particular ways about plans, strategies, and difficulties, teachers can provide information and models supportive of growth in school literacy skills (Palincsar and Brown, 1984; Applebee and Langer, 1983; Calkins, 1983). Application of this developmental research to teaching depends at least in part on the assumption of a dialogic model of learning that can be generalized across settings, purposes, and relationships.

Sociolinguistic and ethnographic research on the differential classroom treatment of children seems to share the assumption that a dialogic model of language development can be generalized to school settings. In arguing that, at least for white middle class children, ways of learning about and using language in school are strongly associated with language learning and use at home, researchers assume strong contextual

similarities between middle class homes and classrooms (Philips, 1983; Shultz, Erickson and Florio, 1982). Heath, for example, argues as follows:

> Close analyses of how mainstream school-oriented children come to learn to take meaning from books at home suggest that such children learn not only how to take meaning from books, but also how to talk about it. In doing the latter, they repeatedly practice routines which parallel closely those of classroom interaction (1982; p. 56).

Despite the intuitive appeal of studying routine teaching practice and locating the means of change therein, this research can be criticized for assuming a direct relationship between middle class values and school practices (Bernstein, 1977) and for tacitly reifying school norms by stressing the description of routine practice (Giroux, 1983). The argument that in theory or, at least for some economically privileged children, in practice, learning at home resembles learning at school obscures important differences and sources of conflict between the two settings.

By stressing the practice of instructional routines both cognitive and sociolinguistic research can be understood to imply that educational improvement rests with changes in the ways teachers talk, listen, read and write with students (see, for example, Duffy, Roehler, Meloth, Vavrus, Book, Putnam and Wesselman, in press; Au and Mason, 1981: Calkins, 1983). Thus research emphasizing the "practice of routines" rather than the norms and beliefs that organize and constrain practice can limit teacher education and improvement efforts to changes at the level of discrete instructional behaviors.

Behavioral approaches to teacher education and change persist despite two decades decade of frustration and disappointment with them. It remains difficult for researchers and educators to link local practices and institutional norms in ways that help practitioners examine and change not simply what they say and do, but the social and intellectual conditions that shape and limit what is said and done in classrooms (Erickson, 1985). In the spirit of critical examination of our models and metaphors for language instruction, the remainder of this paper takes a closer look at writing conferences as school literacy events and considers the intellectual and social features of schooling that play a part in shaping them.

Writing Conferences as School Literacy Events

Writing conferences occur at all levels from pre-school to university and are strongly encouraged in some school buildings and districts. Their popularity seems related to a recent shift in interest from evaluation of isolated student texts to dialogic support of the composing process and its development (Beach and Bridwell, 1984). This shift in emphasis from product to process potentially transforms the teacher's role from task master and

evaluator to respondent (Van Nostrand, Shaw and Pettigrew, 1983) and opens the door to greater peer interaction in literacy learning (Gere and Stevens, 1985).

However liberating these changes seem for teachers and students, the promise of writing conferences as scaffolded dialogue between teacher/experts and student/novices is difficult to reconcile with extant research on classroom communication (summarized in Green, 1983 and Cazden, 1985). Teachers dominate instructional talk. Not only do they speak far more than students, but they generally control topic and access to the floor. In addition, teacher talk is powerful. It interweaves referential and social information with public assessment (Heap, 1985). Since schools inculcate propositional, procedural, and normative knowledge, teachers evaluate student talk for evidence of learning in all three areas. Typically, teachers initiate instructional talk, students respond, and teachers evaluate those responses (Mehan, 1978).

Research on classroom writing suggests that its structure and functions are quite similar to those of classroom talk. Teachers routinely initiate writing tasks and topics, students write in response, and their writing is evaluated by teachers (Applebee, 1981; Staton, Shuy, Kreeft, and Reed, 1982). As with student talk, when teachers evaluate student texts, they appear to seek evidence of propositional, procedural and normative knowledge. Just as student talk is shaped by the social and cognitive demands of schooling, so are student texts and the talk that surrounds their creation (Stubbs, 1982; Street, 1984).

In the idealized writing conference, students and teachers are practically free to trade places. Students have the right to initiate talk and determine topic. Teachers are obliged to respond to students and their texts. Students take from those responses useful information about revision (Murray, 1979; Graves, 1983). Thus writing conferences potentially alter the rights and duties of teacher and students and, in so doing, change the range of strategies available to students for learning (Barnes, 1976). Given what we know about classroom discourse, it seems appropriate to question the possibility of such localized change in the classroom task, talk, and text.

The research and teaching literature about conferences offers little help in answering this question. It mainly consists of descriptions of successful conferences and prescriptions for practice (Murray, 1968; Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1983). Claims about the widespread value or feasibility of writing conferences remain untested. There is little research on conferences across different kinds of writing or with students of varying ability. We lack analyses of conferences as literacy events. Thus we do not know the extent to which usual definitions of situation, status and role will continue to prevail in writing conferences. We have not, in short, studied the ways in which children's experience of the composing process in school are connected to school social context, pedagogy, and student sociolinguistic

competence (Barrs, 1983; Searle, 1984).

Literacy events are defined by Heath as

> occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies (1982: p. 50).

She observes that "there are rules for the occurrence of literacy events just as there are for speech events" (ibid). These rules vary with situation and social context. If we think of writing conferences as school literacy events, we must study them not simply as strips of dialogue about text or isolated instructional conversations, but as contextually embedded talk supportive of and limited by school's "attitudinal, cultural, economic and technological constraints" (Stubbs, 1980, pp. 15-16). In so doing, the applicability of dialogic models of young children's language development outside school to a theory of classroom instruction is called into question.

Troubling findings arise from the few existing sociolinguistic studies of writing conferences. These studies suggest that prevailing functions of schooling and definition of the teacher's role greatly limit the conferences' possibilities as scaffolded dialogue. They find that conference talk resembles the unilateral communication found in lessons and lacks conversational structure or content which might ultimately, in Freedman's words,

> (1) help students identify and solve composing problems; (2) stimulate practice; and (3) in that practice, transfer their skills to new writings (1985, p. xi).

Freedman and Sperling (1985) studied the writing conferences of one college teacher and four of her students. The students differed in ability and ethnicity, and the researchers found that although the teacher intended to treat all students equally, what she taught, how she taught it, the synchrony of conference talk, and the teacher's openness to further conferences differed in relation to students' writing abilities, ways of presenting themselves, and chosen topics.

In ongoing research on conferences in an upper elementary classroom, Michaels and her colleagues (1986) find that teacher response and student revision seem geared, not to students' articulation of their audience, purpose, and writing problems, but to the attainment of a match between the teacher's implicit schema for an adequate textual representation of a classroom field trip. How the conference proceeds and the kind of response a student receives seem related to how well the student's text already matches the teacher's schema and to the interpersonal relationship between teacher and student predicting whether a match (or a mismatch) is likely.

In a study of thirty-two junior college writing conferences Jacob (1982) expected to find that conferences were conversations driven by student authors' interests and concerns. Instead, he found that they were far more like lessons than conversations. In most instances Jacob found that communication was

> unilateral, from instructor to student, that most instructors shaped and directed the conversation, that most students didn't mind the teacher dominance, in fact, they wanted it (p. 386).

Figure 1 is at attempt to locate writing conferences in the context of school instruction. It incorporates social, cultural and intellectual forces that shape the talk that teacher and student have about text. In addition, it acknowledges that participants bring to the writing conference prior knowledge about writing, schooling, and each other. What occurs when teacher and student talk about text reflects social and intellectual features of schooling and the classroom speech community. This talk, in turn limits the kinds of learning possible. In Barnes' words,

> teacher and pupils join in setting up the social context or communication system, and it is this which will shape the range of language strategies used by pupils as they grapple with learning tasks (1976; p. 33).

/Insert Figure 1 here/

Limits on Instructional Talk About Text

If we reflect on the findings of research on conference communication we find that some of the conference's limitations arise precisely because it is instructional talk. Barnes (1976) observed that theories of instruction usually assume talk between experts and novices. The expert/novice distinction in classrooms reinforces ordinary conversational norms in which teachers hold the right to determine tasks and standards. Thus it is extremely difficult for participants to hold instructional conversations in which students can assume rights to initiate talk, determine topic, and serve as "experts" on their own texts.

Other limitations of conferences appear to be related to the knowledge that teachers and students bring --knowledge about the writing process, schooling, and one another. Since classroom talk typically interweaves knowledge in these three domains, it is not surprising some researchers find conferences faltering because of confusion or conflict along interpersonal lines while others locate problems in the absence of shared knowledge about writing.

Still other limits on the writing conference as scaffolded dialogue may arise from the demands of mandated curriculum and the evaluative climate of the school. In this regard, Erickson

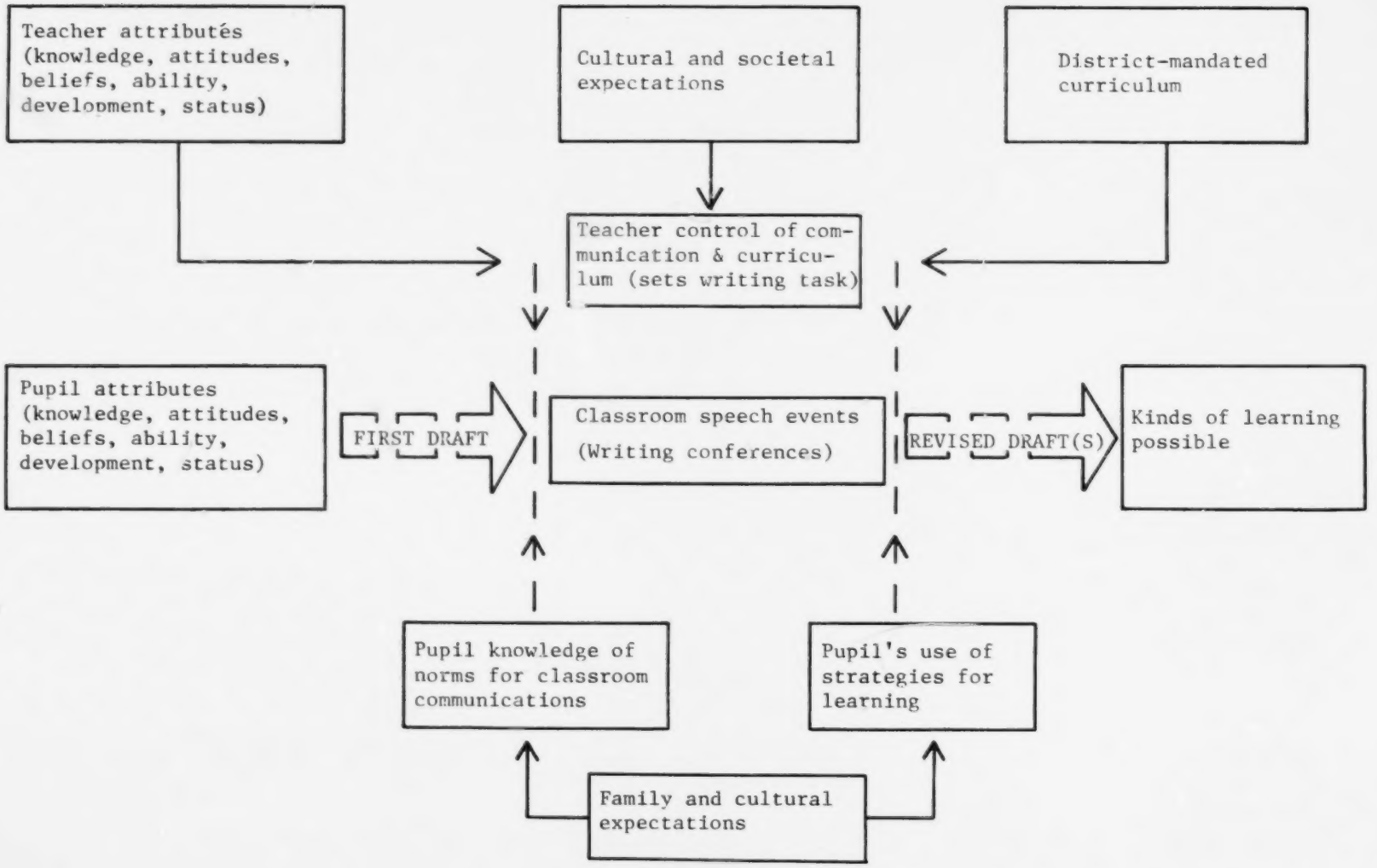
Teacher attributes (knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, ability, development, status)
Cultural and societal expectations
District-mandated curriculum
Teacher control of communication & curriculum (sets writing task)
Pupil attributes (knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, ability, development, status)
FIRST DRAFT
Classroom speech events (Writing conferences)
REVISED DRAFT(S)
Kinds of learning possible
Pupil knowledge of norms for classroom communications
Pupil's use of strategies for learning
Family and cultural expectations

Figure 1. Model of the writing conference as instructional conversation (derived from Beach & Bridwell, 1984 and Barnes, 1975).

argues that while in some aspects of classroom life "the press toward scaffolding work by both teacher and student seems ubiquitous" (1984, p. 534), formal assessment and scripted or partly scripted lessons virtually preclude interactional scaffolding. Thus in some of the most central instructional events, "not only does the learner not have rights to shape the learning task, but neither does the teacher" (ibid).

These circumstances raise questions about the suitability of teacher/student dialogue as an occasion for scaffolded learning or so-called "proleptic teaching" (Wertsch and Stone, 1979). They challenge us to consider what knowledge, beliefs, values, practices, and policies prevent teachers and students from achieving in conversations the higher order learning that takes place with apparent ease in the conversations of young children and their parents. It is in this context that research on classroom talk about text may provide clues to the social and intellectual factors limiting instructional support of writing development. Insight into these limiting factors may help researchers and educators find contextually responsive solutions to problems of writing education.

Writing Growth in an Uncongenial Environment

Concluding an extensive review of research on written composition, Scardamalia and Bereiter summarized the present state of writing education as follows:

> Even a moderately optimistic forecast would have to allow that the teaching of writing will probably continue to take place in a relatively uncongenial environment--so that there is little prospect, for instance, that children will write as naturally as they learn to talk (even if there is no biological impediment to their doing so). Accordingly, there is likely to be a continuing need for instructional solutions to writing problems. The hopeful prospect is that certain processes that are not currently teachable may become more so. Thus there is ground for optimism that the job of the writing teacher may take on a more progressive character and be less tied to the endless cycle of practice and response (1985; p. 799).

By arguing for an "instructional solution" to writing problems, the authors acknowledge the contextual limitations and uniqueness of schools and classrooms as language learning environments. They also encourage thought about the ways classroom talk, tasks, and text might be transformed to improve literacy learning. If the changes we contemplate are, in fact, instructional, to make them we may ultimately need to change our assumptions about the nature of instruction. We may also need to ask when instruction serves language learning and when it does not.

As a teacher educator I share the image of classrooms as "uncongenial" to student writing of more than the "text

generation as knowledge-telling" variety (ibid, p. 792). For several years I have worked with beginning teachers to try to inject into language instruction more possibilities for young authors to engage in higher level aspects of writing such as planning and revision. In this effort I was initially captivated by the metaphor of the conversational scaffold. I encouraged beginning teachers to hold writing conferences with their students. However, my students and I found that it was very difficult to learn to respond to young writers and their texts.

While other aspects of teaching seemed easily reduced to procedure, response eluded many of the beginning teachers. Each year I watched even those who enthusiastically claimed to "love children" struggle to let young writers speak, to find meaning in children's texts, and to support children's planning and revision through talk. Often writing conferences became, not conversations about student writing, but empty rituals or occasions for teachers to edit children's texts. In addition, while the conferences aimed to deal with the writing process rather than the written product in isolation, "process" quickly became the "product" of teachers' efforts.

Pondering why conferences might be so difficult for beginning teachers, it occurred to me that the ideal scaffolded dialogue violates many normative assumptions about school's functions and the teacher role--precisely those norms my students were acquiring as part of their "professionalization." Intriguingly, conferences called into question three assumptions that pervade teaching and teacher education at least at the elementary school level: (1) learning best happens in transactions between experts (teachers) and novices (students); (2) to teach children one needs to be expert not in what one is teaching (curriculum or subject matter) but in how to teach (instructional methods); and (3) education is public and evaluative.

The successful conference depends on student initiation and teacher response in the service of students' writing growth. This reversal of conversational rights and obligations makes havoc with the three assumptions mentioned above. For example, if students have rights to initiate talk or determine topic, teachers may need to be free to relinquish or at least re-negotiate their putative rights to determine the content and pace of student learning. Moreover, if teachers serve not as initiators/evaluators but as respondents, they cannot rely on procedure to "get them through." Each young author or nascent text presents somewhat unique problems and potential for educative talk about text. In order to seize opportunities to teach by conference, teachers need to know a good deal about both their students and the writing process. Research suggests that teachers lack both intimate knowledge of their students' backgrounds and prior learning (Jackson, 1974) and thorough understanding of the school subjects they are responsible to teach (Buchmann, 1982). But unless teachers are to reduce conferences to empty behavioral rituals, they cannot "get by"

with mere procedure.

Changes in the Conditions for Learning

If we return to the problem with which this paper began--the possibility of generalizing from research on the learning of oral language at home to language teaching in school--we can begin to think about conditions which preclude or might improve classroom language learning. For the purpose of comparison, I distilled from studies of mother-child conversation the following six maxims for supporting language learning. These maxims represent not only what care-givers say and do, but what they know and the social resources they draw on in conversations with young children:

(1) Assume competence;
(2) Know the learner;
(3) Share interest in the task at hand;
(4) Follow the learner;
(5) Capitalize on uncertainty

Ninio and Bruner (1976), Halliday (1975), Wertsch (1980), and others have shown in experimental and descriptive work that the setting, purposes, and intimate relationship of children and care-givers are tied to learning by conversation. Classrooms, typified in Jackson's words, by "crowds, praise and power" (1974; p. 10) discourage and may even prevent teachers following such a simple set of maxims. The power inherent in the teacher role may inevitably limit the possibilities of genuine dialogue with learners. In addition, teachers' power is tempered by institutions. The pressures on teachers to serve the school's sorting and evaluation functions limit their degrees of freedom to relinquish or mitigate aspects of their authority. Teachers' relative lack of subject matter knowledge and the emptiness of much elementary curricula often preclude teachers and students sharing interesting and challenging learning problems. In short, if, as Hawkins asserts,

> adults and children, like adults with each other, can associate well only in worthy interests and pursuits, only through a community of subject-matter and engagement which extends beyond their intimacy (1974, p. 49),

teachers may be in the untenable position of lacking both worthy shared interests and intimacy with learners.

Paradoxically, while profound language learning is possible in adult/child conversation at home, teacher/student conversation may not be the optimum way to support writing development at school. Instead, teachers want to draw from research on the talk of mothers and children not literally a technology or way of speaking, but insight into conditions under which social life serves to support intellectual development. In so doing, teachers may find they want to consider, in fact, talking less. While

instruction may serve well to teach about some aspects of the writing process, other kinds of pedagogy may infuse writing with enough purpose and complexity to engage students in higher order activities such as planning and revising text. At this level, student authors become, in a sense, experts on their own writing problems and purposes. With expertise defined this way, students may learn from talking with one another. If this is the case, teachers and other school authorities may need to relinquish goals of a uniform language arts curriculum for all children or a rigid system of evaluation. Finally, teachers may, indeed, want and need to learn a great deal more about the writing process. However, this knowledge will be useful not necessarily to "pass on" via instruction to beginners, but to plan rich occasions for learning, to see greater meaning in student texts, and to have a greater repertoire for response.

The sorts of changes mentioned above are not simple behavioral "fixes." Nor does responsibility for making them rest exclusively with teachers and students. To understand limits on teachers' ways of speaking with students one must traverse the social organization of schools and classrooms, the conditions of the teacher's work, the role of the learner, and the nature of the curriculum. In so doing, teachers need to be free to change not only aspects of their own communicative behavior, but to work with other members of the educational community to shape conditions for classroom communication that are genuinely supportive of student growth and development.

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